

Behind closed doors: Pornographic uses of the Victorian

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Abstract

This essay argues that the frequency and consistency of Victorian-set or Victorian-influenced pornographic films highlight hardcore's reliance on class- and gender-related spatial transgression for erotic appeal: boundaries of public and private that the films specifically associate with Victorian social structures. This essay illuminates a self-reflexive pornographic heritage and demonstrates the peculiar tension between sexual repression and sexual perversity evidenced in cultural understandings of both the 19th-century and modern day pornography. I argue that in such films as *A Scent of Heather* (1980), *Memoirs of a Chambermaid* (1987), and *Victorian Love Letters* (2010), 19th-century material culture and technology, including written text, clothing, furniture, and domestic space, are eroticized in pornographic film specifically in connection with gender and class. In so doing, Victorian sexuality is represented in pornography as simultaneously regressive and perverse, as well as intimately tied to the transgression of strict class boundaries; boundaries that, the films seem to suggest, are no longer present in enlightened modern culture.

Keywords

Adaptation, film, pornography, sexuality, Victorian

For the transgression to work, it must be played out against a background of normality. (Umberto Eco, *How to recognize a porn movie*, 1992: 224)

Sexually repressed Victorian England is the fertile crescent of sexual deviance. Shaun Costello, *Adult Film Director*¹

In his review of the notorious German video, *Extra Terrestrial: Die Ausserirdische* (1995), popularly known as *ET The Porno*, online B-movie reviewer The Cinema

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Snob exclaims, 'This movie takes place in the Victorian era? Why? What the hell is the point of that?' (The Cinema Snob, 2010). His question is central to this essay: what is the point of setting a pornographic film (let alone a pornographic sci-fi film) in the Victorian era? In the film, ET is sent to Earth on a mission to examine the population's 'strange customs.' An omnipresent voice informs ET on departure, 'this Earth is a place inhabited by strange beings with strange customs that will perhaps leave you scared.' These 'strange customs' are sex acts, which intrigue ET enough to gradually get involved. What is interesting about this relatively plotless and amateurish production is that the filmmakers committed to setting it during the Victorian period, complete with costumes, period furniture, and stilted dialect. The premise suggests that alien beings learning about sexual customs would do best to visit the Victorian era, where according to this film human sexuality and its strangeness is most emphasized. ET explains to the humans, 'On my planet we do not have this custom, therefore I was invited to come to this planet to learn more of the earthlings. To learn of your ways to act, to think, and to get pleasure.' The Victorians, the film suggests, are the best version of 'earthlings' from which to learn these things.

The Cinema Snob's baffled query suggests a certain level of incompetency on the part of the filmmakers (perhaps deservedly so, though the costumes and sheer gusto of the endeavor are somewhat impressive). Yet, the number of pornographic films from various decades and genres that employ the Victorian period for a multitude of purposes suggest that there is indeed a point to setting hardcore films in the Victorian period. More generally, there is a point to using postmodern notions of the Victorian in modern pornographic film as a tool in the cultural problem solving that such body genres perform. The Victorian period itself has been a popular source for working out cultural anxieties during the latter part of the 20th century and there are few signs of the waning of this trend. Neo-Victorian fictions—'contemporary fiction that engages with the Victorian era, at either the level of plot, structure or both' (Hadley, 2010: 4)—have increased in quantity and popularity over the past five decades, demonstrating a postmodern interest and need for 'the Victorians' as a way of shaping and understanding modern culture. As Louisa Hadley asserts, 'Rather than merely being another manifestation of that [wider] cultural fascination... neo-Victorian fictions seek to both reinsert the Victorians into their particular historical context and engage with contemporary uses of the Victorians which efface that historical context' (2010: 6).

John Kucich and Dianne F Sadoff argue that in the postmodern age of self-surveillance, the Victorian is privileged 'as its historical "other"' (2000: xi) because first, 'the postmodern fetishizes notions of cultural emergence' (2000: xv), and second, 'the network of overdeterminations shaped by economics, sexuality, political struggle, and technological forms privileges the Victorian period as the site of historical emergence through which postmodernism attempts to think its own cultural identity' (2000: xxv). It is unsurprising, then, that as soon as the hardcore feature became prolific in the wake of the 1973 *Miller v. California* obscenity ruling,

pornographic film took to appropriating the Victorian as part of its generic function, especially considering the special sexual symbolism that notions of 'Victorian' hold for postmodern culture. Mainstream media utilizes and rewrites Victorian culture with an emphasis on sexuality, so it is almost inevitable that pornography should do so. It is also instructive when considering pornographic uses of the Victorian, to simply note, as Jennifer Green-Lewis does, that, 'We can see the Victorians... The Victorians are visually real to us because they have a documentary assertiveness unavailable to persons living before the age of the camera' (2000: 31). Unstated in this observation is the fact that the earliest forms of visual pornography in a modern sense depicted Victorians, complete with Victorian garb and styling (Sigel, 2002).

It is striking how little a distance into the past the average consumer considers the history of pornography, or that it has a history at all considering the low status of such a medium. If 'that' has a history, one might argue, it must surely be art. As Walter Kendrick notes, one development of obscenity law has been to broaden what is considered art and regard everything left over as 'porn' (1996). But porn *does* have a history. Or, more importantly, our cultural understanding of what constitutes porn has a history, and is shaped by this history, affected by legal, scientific, artistic, and political discourse. Lisa Z Sigel explains, 'Pornography as source material provides insight into the social imaginary' (2002: 2), but pornography is not a document of sexual fact: 'It acts as a mirror—or, more accurately, a series of broken mirrors—that reflects, refracts, and distorts a picture of sexuality... Pornography is caught in an intimate relationship with broader society, even though it remains tied to the realm of possibilities' (2002: 2–3). In this way, pornographic uses of the Victorian expose broader postmodern uses of the Victorian era as a way of working through sexuality and sexual politics via representation.

In this essay, I will explore and analyze a collection of pornographic films that make use of the Victorian not only through setting, but also in appropriating costume, customs, imagery, and other symbolism that postmodern culture associates with the Victorian era. In many ways, these films chose themselves; in my research on this subject, I have attempted to track down all hardcore pornographic films set during the Victorian period. There are many more in existence than those addressed here. I have chosen to include films that are representative in their use of the Victorian era, notable in the degree to which certain themes and impulses are present, and that contrast in the ways in which they transgress gender and class boundaries. Furthermore, I am aware that my argument might appear somewhat esoteric; to only apply to a marginal, niche bracket of films for a marginal, niche audience. While this may be true to an extent, my argument can be extended more broadly to the diverse and often contradictory genre of film pornography and its consumers. I want to question what it is about the Victorian period that renders it enduringly attractive to hardcore filmmakers and consumers alike, in turn querying the nature of pornographic appeal in a more general sense. Just as for Sigel pornography reflects the sexual imaginary of its consumers, so these films

illuminate the complex ways in which pornography and its consumers make use of 'the Victorian.'

Porning to transgress

One of the defining characteristics of the postmodern age is its nostalgia for the past; a historicity that, rather than being truly historical, instead constantly revisits other historical periods in a self-conscious effort to grasp a present-day identity. Many writers have identified the Victorian era as the most useful period for consumers to revisit in order to satiate a variety of present day needs, needs that constitute a 'crisis of postmodern historiography' (Kucich and Sadoff, 2000: ix). The 1980s and 1990s, Kucich and Sadoff argue, 'located the Victorian age as historically central to late-century postmodern consciousness' (2000: xi), with a particular interest in Victorian sexuality. The Victorian era is used by postmodern consumers as a monolithic set of principles and morals to process things about the present day in a way that uncritically indulges in consumerism. Victorian sexuality is a particularly popular site of postmodern, or 'post-Victorian' (Sadoff, 2010: xiii), reimagining.

As a genre that privileges the sex act as a solution or answer to cultural problems (Williams, 1999), pornography and its consumers reimagine and use the Victorian in sexually specific ways; they 'porn' the Victorian era. Related to this 'porning,' Cindy Patton observes that pornographic lampooning of Hollywood reflects 'an erotic and humorous critique of the mass media's role in invoking but never delivering the sex' (Patton, 1997: 132). Patton stresses that 'types of sex are rarely presented as taboo in themselves, only as representationally taboo—what Hollywood or television is unwilling to show' (Patton, 1997: 132). Similarly, Laura Kipnis asserts, pornography's 'greatest pleasure is to locate each and every one of society's taboos, prohibitions, and proprieties and systematically transgress them one by one' (Kipnis, 1999: 164). In this way, to porn is to disrupt: to render visible those sexual and off/scene aspects of mainstream culture which are typically hidden.

Yet what remains unspoken in this act of pornographic transgression? Michel Foucault contends that the transgression and the limit rely on each other; that 'transgression incessantly crosses and recrosses a line which closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration, and thus it is made to return once more right to the horizon of the uncrossable' (Foucault, 1977: 34). Thus, pornography thrives upon the binary oppositions and hypocrisies of western culture—oppositions and hypocrisies neatly encapsulated in a postmodern notion of Victorian sexuality—and obsessively enacts a 'theatrics of transgression' (Kipnis, 1999: 164) scene after scene, film after film.

In the majority of these films and the blurbs they utilize, a series of related binary oppositions are made; oppositions that can be seen reflected more generally in postmodern American culture itself: Old/New, Victorian/Modern,

European/American. A handy example of this tendency in action is the press release for *My Mother's Best Friend Vol. 4: Lost in Time* (2011) posted on the adult film site Adult DVD Talk. The film is part of an older woman/younger man series that flirts with incest, and is a period piece. The publicist states, 'it's set in the Edwardian Era and has a Jane Austen look to it.' When a porn consumer remarks, 'My first thought is that Jane Austin [*sic*] wasn't an Edwardian. She was a Georgian and died 80 years before the start of the Edwardian period,' the writer of the press release responds, 'I was describing more the style of the porn as Jane Austen not the time period—as in period piece with forbidden love and great costumes' (Jane Austen Porn, 2010).

Likewise, *The Naughty Victorians* (1975) is referred to by Robert Rimmer, a prolific and respected adult film reviewer who wrote several volumes of porn reviews as well as essays on the films and the industry, as 'a funny spoof on eighteenth century pornographic novels' (1993: 189) and presumes it is English-made (it was a US production). Similarly, the specific 1915 setting of *Bedtime Tales* (1985) is simultaneously referred to as 'Victorian' in the film's dialogue. The blurb states it is an era 'when even a hint of ankle could be considered scandalous,' but on the other hand, 'Of course, behind closed doors they were showing off a lot more than just ankles!' Films such as this demonstrate a pornographic rhetoric that trades in the eroticism of the sexual practices of the supposedly repressed, but viewed from the vantage point of the supposedly sexually enlightened. At the same time, the era of the sexually repressed is also the era of sexual perversion, and thus sexual hypocrisy, which is ripe for pornographic exploitation.

The antiquity of Victorian Europe is both disdained and erotically indulged in pornography. Writing, clothing, uptight language, traditional gender roles, and repressive institutions are seen as old-fashioned and to be scorned even while they are explored at length for pornographic appeal. Likewise, many reviews find the language used in these neo-Victorian films to be amusing in their properness, yet also praise a perceived accuracy and authenticity. The appeal of proper language used to describe pornographic activities seems to lie somewhere at the intersection of social transgression, humor, and postmodern superiority. Indeed, reviews of *A Scent of Heather* (1980), a Gothic tale of accidental incest, are also telling in their belief that 'modern' technology featured in the film must be an error on the part of the filmmakers. Such assumptions reveal two postmodern beliefs: that the Victorian period did not have the advanced technologies we enjoy today, and that pornographic films have low production values, scant background research, and are generally produced with a disdain for details. Rimmer writes:

It's a gothic romance in an English castle, complete with subdued lighting and believable costuming, even down to the ladies' underwear. There are only one or two anachronisms, such as the ladies wearing heels too high, an electric bedroom light and a modern telephone. The acting of Paul Thomas, R Bolla and Veronica Hart is exceptional, and the dialogue is a laughing, happily corny 1980s version of Victorian conversation. (1993: 128)

Rimmer refers to the mansion as a castle, the location as English, and the conversation as Victorian, in spite of several indications in the film that suggest otherwise.

Adult film historian and reviewer Dries Vermulen dates the setting of *Heather* much later, but similarly comments on the use of electric lights: 'it does a good job of recreating the early 20th century and more specifically Hollywood depictions thereof, occasional anachronisms (such as electric lights!) notwithstanding' (2006). In reality, incandescent light bulbs were being developed for commercial use in the late 19th century, and while it still may have been unusual for a household to use electric lights until the 1920s, the seeming absurdity of *A Scent of Heather's* use of such bulbs lies more in a postmodern notion of Victorianness than it does in facts. Furthermore, it is tempting to posit that if this were a big budget Hollywood production, these reviewers would have questioned their assumption prior to writing the article, as opposed to assuming a superiority of knowledge to the bumbling pornographers.

The Victorians and the origins of pornography

While many tend to think of the Victorians as publicly proper, and privately perverse (Marcus, 2009), Sigel argues that such distinctions of legitimate and underground, of private and public, in the 19th century are not as clear cut as popularly believed. When introducing her focus on "'minor" writers (what else could pornographers be but minor?)' (Sigel, 2002: 10), Sigel clarifies that 'the gulf between the realms of sub rosa writings and fine literature diminishes upon closer inspection. A substantial overlap existed between pornography and the respectable publishing trade for much of the nineteenth century' (2002: 10). In short, Sigel asserts, 'Pornography is not the "underworld" of Victorian literature, and the attempt to segregate it as such does an injustice to the complicated world of British society and cultural production' (Sigel, 2002: 10). Likewise, Victorian consumers should not be simplified in such a manner as a 'norm' and an 'other.' Simon Joyce challenges such an approach that examines the 'other' while 'leav[ing] uninterrogated that "official" view as a normative pole of definition' (Joyce, 2002: 5). In this way, pornographic appropriations of the Victorian point toward a deconstruction of such binary thinking, even as they rely on such binaries for erotic transgression. These films can direct us toward viewing our recent history as a continuum; a paradoxical one, but a continuum and a cycle nonetheless. Furthermore, the films usefully present a paradox: on the one hand, the films utilize the Victorian in a way that posits 'us' against 'them,' while on the other hand the films operate under a tacit understanding of some form of Victorian sexual activity and perversion. In this way, these films seem to simultaneously suggest both sexual repression and sexual liberation in both the Victorian and the post-Victorian.

Sigel notes that 'An analysis of the period between 1815 and 1914 can help clarify our current debates over pornography by showing how certain social and sexual formations solidified' (2002: 9). Likewise, an analysis of postmodern uses of this period of sexual formation can clarify our understanding of western culture,

sexuality, and the ways in which pornographic film operates. Not only is the Victorian period regarded as the origin of modern sexuality—a ‘break’ in sexuality—but it is also, consciously or not, regarded as the origin of modern pornography and fetishism thanks to a 19th-century fascination with taxonomy and sexology (Kendrick, 1996: 68–71), and shifts in technology, particularly the printing press and visual media such as photography and the postcard.

The Victorian era may be synonymous with sexual repression, traditional gender roles, and the private nuclear family, but it is also an era associated with the creation and development of sexology and modern medicine. Sexologists such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840–1902) and Havelock Ellis (1859–1939) established a *scientia sexualis* that, in the more malignant cases, Foucault refers to as a ‘pornography of the morbid... characteristic of the *fin de siècle* society’ (Foucault, 1990 [1978]: 54). Foucault goes on:

What needs to be situated, therefore, is not the threshold of a new rationality whose discovery was marked by Freud—or someone else—but the progressive formation (and also the transformations) of that ‘interplay of truth and sex’ which was bequeathed to us by the nineteenth century ... Misunderstandings, avoidances, and evasions were only possible, and only had their effects, against the background of this strange endeavor: to tell the truth of sex. (Foucault, 1990 [1978]: 56–57)

Sigel’s contention that ‘Pornography and sexology influenced each other at the margins of their disciplines’ (Sigel, 2002: 116) is a heritage present in pornographic film of the late 20th century. Not only are pornographic films categorized according to sexual preference, perversion, and persuasion, but also neo-Victorian pornographic films utilize sexology discourse as a way of instigating illicit sexual activity. In this way, the films demonstrate a postmodern, tongue-in-cheek awareness of the absurdity of Victorian hypocrisy; the characters and films use feigned innocence and medical objectivity as a way to initiate sex, suggesting that the Victorian era used serious medical inquiry as an alibi for salacious and perverse exploration.

As Foucault suggests, as sexology blossomed, so too did a modern understanding of pornography. Between 1880 and 1914, Sigel observes, ‘pornographers stripped away characterization, plot, and setting and opened up room for an intense formulaic focus on specific sex acts’ (2002: 82). Yet Sigel resists the way ‘critics have lambasted these works for diminishing the artistry of writing about sexuality and for the growing perversity they displayed,’ arguing that a new consumer culture of ‘specialized texts for specialized tastes’ amongst the leisure classes are intimately connected to such proliferation of perversity (2002: 82). Our modern understanding of pornography is rooted in the Victorian era, where penetration became a core theme (Sigel, 2002: 94), fetishes became central to narrative, and ‘the consumption of desire for its own sake, rather than in the quest for “liberty” or the “scientific” truth about sexuality’ (Sigel, 2002: 93) became newly emphasized.

It is striking when reviewing stylistic shifts in pornography how cyclical both the trends and arguments are regarding this fluctuating genre. Sigel’s description of the

decreased importance of context and characterization of the late 19th century, citing the “‘full moon,’ which excluded all unnecessary ‘props’ like torsos and limbs’ (2002: 105), is reminiscent of the stag films and loops of the early 20th century. In turn, this is reminiscent of the shift away from features of the 1970s’ golden age and toward what is now known as ‘all-sex,’ ‘wall-to-wall,’ or ‘gonzo.’ In 1991, *Adult Video News* reviewer Steve Austin asked, ‘What’s the difference between the old silent 8 millimeter loops and the video features of today?’ His answer: ‘The guys take their sox [sic] off now’ (Jennings, 2000: 226). The common link between these different moments of crisis is new technology, whether it be the still camera, the motion picture camera, the video cassette recorder, or the internet. Also common to each crisis is the assumption that the sex act outside of traditional narrative is meaningless, or paradoxically corrupting, and the fact that these forms of media are available to an ever-widening audience—the ‘unwashed masses.’

That film pornographers have adapted Victorian literary pornography speaks to the fact that we regard the Victorians as simultaneously perverse and repressed.² Peter N Stearns argues that scholars of the early 20th century constructed a stereotype of ‘the repressed Victorian’ (1990: 47), which led to the cultural truism that the Victorians were ‘responsible for creating the sex-negative culture that twentieth century “moderns” have rebelled against’ (1990: 47). In an attempt to revise this stereotype, more recent scholars have unwittingly established a new stereotype of Victorian sexuality that is in Stearns’s view ‘overly sanguine’ (1990: 47). The truth, Stearns asserts, is a combination of the two stereotypes: Victorians regarded sex as a powerful force that could lead to good or ill depending on whether the sex act was ‘sensual’ or ‘spiritual’ in nature. According to Stearns, ‘The Victorians imagined a drama of an omnipresent powerful sex drive propelled towards pleasure but susceptible to the dangers of excess and ruin. Self-control and the spiritualization of desire would make possible an autonomous self and a healthy society’ (1990: 49).

In the case of pornographic uses of the Victorian, a careful drawing on both the repressed and the sanguine stereotypes of Victorian sexuality is employed: while the pornographic adaptation utilizes the repressed stereotype as a way of ‘exposing’ or ‘opening up’ some kind of off-limits group of people, the appropriation would not work without an accompanying sense that what was really going on was much more dirty and perverse. As Carmine Sarracino and Kevin M Scott ambivalently observe, ‘The main difference, then, between Puritanism and porn is that instead of fleeing from sex, porn, proceeding from the same premises, indulges in it transgressively and promiscuously’ (2008: 200). Pornographic appropriations of the Victorian trade in the public/private, sensual/spiritual split that Stearns delineates, upholding these divides and deconstructing them.

The fashions and technologies of neo-Victorian pornography

While pornography is typically seen as a masculine genre, made by men for men,³ period costume dramas and heritage film are typically seen as feminine genres;

genres that privilege and glorify the domestic, private sphere maintained by middle-class Victorian culture. In addition, such aesthetic productions are often seen as sexist as they maintain a stifling feminine domestic space, and reinforce nostalgia for gender hierarchy and class boundaries. Fashion, lingerie in particular, has been critiqued as a site of the perpetuation of such gendered spheres (Wilson, 2003). Susan Faludi argues in *Backlash* that lingerie of the 1980s ‘celebrated the repression, not the flowering, of female sexuality. The ideal Victorian lady it had originally been designed for, after all, wasn’t supposed to have any libido’ (1991: 189). Faludi’s perception of Victorian female sexuality is not quite accurate, as discussed above, and her critique of lingerie as harking back to an age where female bodies were painfully restrained and women embodied a more ideal, pure notion of femininity, is not quite accurate either.

Jane Juffer’s analysis of Faludi’s argument is instructive in considering the uses of Victorian aesthetics in pornography, particularly the use and eroticization of Victorian gowns and undergarments. Juffer argues that ‘the nostalgia for a more contained body and a more “secret” sexuality within the trappings of Victorian, imperialist England’ (1998: 146) evident in the *Victoria’s Secret* catalog is not simple ‘backlash.’ Rather, ‘the sale and consumption of lingerie... illustrate the contradictions and gaps in the attempts to reassert a bounded private sphere; for [Victoria’s Secret], the emphasis on privacy is undercut by the appeal to women as consumers in pursuit of their own pleasures—versions of the New Woman’ (Juffer, 1998: 147). Such gaps and contradictions are also present in pornography, especially in the medium’s reliance on notions of feminine privacy for the successful transgression of these same notions. As Laura Kipnis points out, ‘pornography would be nowhere without its most flagrant border transgression, this complete disregard for the public/private divide’ (1999: 171). Yet it would be more accurate to say that pornography is constantly regarding the public/private divide, and that the divide is constantly being renegotiated as part of the pornographic impulse.

Juffer argues that the classically beautiful models of the *Victoria’s Secret* catalog ‘can freely cross boundaries of public and private’ but that this mobility ‘is tied to class mobility’ (1998: 160). Ultimately, Juffer asserts, ‘Victoria’s Secret is ambiguously nostalgic, contradicting Faludi’s emphasis on a backlash that seeks to return women to some previous, pure notion of femininity. The catalog wants to claim *both* a tradition and a rearticulation of femininity’ (1998: 161). The reliance on class privilege for such rearticulations is connected to the palatable and clean female bodies depicted in the catalog. The models link ‘place and body in a manner that distinguishes the catalog from the public and tasteless’ (Juffer, 1998: 158) distinguishing them from the ‘material, defiantly vulgar, corporeal’ bodies of pornography (Kipnis, 1999: 132). The films addressed here utilize Victorian aesthetics in a way that establishes and deconstructs boundaries, exploits and maintains class and gender divisions of public and private, and clothing is a major component of this gesture. As Green-Lewis notes, the Victorian in postmodern culture ‘designates an aesthetic, rather than a precisely historical, concept’ (2000: 31), and in the

predominantly visual medium of pornography, visual symbolism of the Victorian is a frequently adopted method of expressing cultural sexual messages.

The written word is at an uneasy intersection between the visual, the aural, and the literary. Kucich and Sadoff point out the way 'the technologies of postmodern media culture fetishize or are haunted by Victorian cultural documents' (2000: xxiii), and pornographic film is no exception. Indeed, the written confessional has been a staple of pornography since Aretino's *Ragionamenti* (1534–1536). Aretino created what would become the prototype for the pornographic tradition: 'the explicit representation of sexual activity, the form of the dialogue between women, the discussion of the behavior of prostitutes and the challenge to moral conventions of the day' (Hunt, 1993: 26). Furthermore, the act of writing itself has been connected to sexuality through authors such as the Marquis de Sade (1740–1814), with his spools of obsessive sadistic pornographic novels, and the anonymous author of *My Secret Life* (c. 1888), a massive eleven volume confessional detailing the various sexual exploits of a Victorian gentleman. No wonder pornographic film attempts to harness some of the erotic power of the written word.

Lesbian Adventures: Victorian Love Letters (Dir. Nica Noelle, 2009) and *Memoirs of a Chambermaid* (Dir. Eric Edwards, 1987) nostalgically eroticize writing as a pre-modern communication technology by setting it in opposition to the postmodern technologies of tape recording, cell phones, and other modern communications, in turn highlighting and transgressing class and gender boundaries. Sadoff observes that 'technological subjects' in the postmodern world 'respond to stress in their environments by drawing their subjectivity inward (and, by implication, constituting the nineteenth-century interiority we associate with the scene of reading and the consumption of literature)' (2010: xiv). This 'technologically produced anxiety' is explicitly borne out in Noelle's *Victorian Love Letters*. As the DVD blurb explains: 'In a magical time before email and cell phones, there were only letters. Sweetheart Video rewinds to simpler and more erotic times in this beautiful film about Victorian passions, repression, and undeniable lust.'

Using a vignette format, Noelle presents four scenes in which a sexual encounter is instigated by a love letter. The scenes do not utilize the written word, nor verbalization of the written word, beyond the initial premise. The erotics of each scene are in fact grounded firmly in Victorian aesthetics, particularly costuming, with an emphasis on excess material, bodies spilling out of tightly bound undergarments, and sexual contact made through the gaps and holes in the extra-material bloomers each woman wears. As the DVD promises, it 'Featur[es] authentic Victorian dresses and undergarments, shot and filmed in an [sic] real Victorian mansion.'

Memoirs of a Chambermaid also utilizes period costuming, yet foregrounds the written word, articulated verbally, as the primary site of eroticism. Indeed, Noelle's sex scenes are long, relatively unmediated,⁴ and aurally punctuated only by the sounds of sexual activity, while *Memoirs* features sex scenes that frequently end without the typical money shot, and are often disrupted by narrative interruptions and editing. Edwards intentionally created this film for the newly emerging

'couples' market, aided by his girlfriend who also co-wrote the script. Edwards explains, aside from plot and build-up to the sex scenes, a couples film should not have many 'clinical shots. . . In fact, in a couple's movie, I may not even want to see the obligatory Pop Shot unless it's done tastefully.'⁵ Indeed, in Edwards' film, there are few 'pop shots,' very little visual emphasis on penetration—the 'meat shot'—and great emphasis on reading, writing, and articulation of desires. As the male love object Jason repeatedly states to his lover, in place of traditionally pornographic articulations of physical lust, 'I love it when you write.' In their own distinct way, *Victorian Love Letters* and *Memoirs of a Chambermaid* paradoxically eroticize the written word in a way that frames literature as feminine and private, yet at the same time disrupt this boundary by depicting it visually on video. Again, by articulating fetishized components of private Victorian culture in postmodern film pornography, the cultural boundaries that establish gender and class norms are reinforced in order to be 'trashed' by the pornographic impulse. In this way, gender and class implications of public and private spheres are complicated and leveled only to be re-established for further transgression.

Postmodern nostalgia for a Victorian, contained sexuality is evidenced in *Victorian Love Letters*, as well as in Noelle's boy-girl series, *Tales of Victorian Lust*, produced by Sweet Sinner, which includes *A Man With a Maid* adapted from the Edwardian pornographic novel. *Victorian Love Letters* eroticizes the written word, yet in visually articulating sexual activity the written word is usurped by the visual. In turn, the aesthetics of Victorian femininity become the focus of contained sexuality and its release. The erotics of each scene rely less on the premise of the written word, and more on the concept of the bound, private body and its imminent exposure. Yet, while Juffer's focus is on the clean, 'orifice-less' bodies of the Victoria's Secret catalog, the female bodies in *Victorian Love Letters*, while perhaps not grotesque, are certainly uncontained both visually and aurally. The use of corsets, with breasts spilling from the top, sights and sounds of sexual fluids, and the loud and often messy female orgasms, emphasize the way pornography relies on the concept of feminine, private, contained space for pornographic pleasure just as much as its deconstruction composes the scene. Graphic, noisy depictions of cunnilingus, then, are emphasized by the framing of a tightly laced Victorian boot in shot. In this sense, Noelle's emphasis on 'the private-public division that has worked, as many feminists have documented, to contain female sexuality within a traditional definition of home' (Juffer, 1998: 148), is played with in nostalgic ways (for example, the women engaging in tea, before nervously suggesting that they go upstairs so that no one will see them). At the same time, these divisions are deconstructed by their unmediated documentation on film. The 'sense of propriety' and 'appeals to privacy, British sophistication' that Juffer locates in the Victoria's Secret catalog (1998: 153) are contrasted by the representations of sex, and by the diversity of female bodies on display. The female performers used in the film vary in age and body type (though not in race) and each scene trades in the erotics of age and class, featuring two women who contrast in age, and by extension social position.⁶

The hierarchical nature of such age difference is marked in two of the vignettes ('Petulant Little Girls' and 'Secret Muse') by verbal and physical chastisement of the younger partner, recalling and eroticizing a bygone era where the categories of 'adult' and 'child' were distinct and reinforced by society (Sarracino and Scott, 2008: 32–33). Such demonstrations of age hierarchy are prominent in 'Petulant Little Girls' where Magdalene punishes Nicole for writing love letters with an open hand spanking over Magdalene's knee, which eventually becomes a caress. Likewise, in 'Secret Muse,' Julia Ann jealously demands to see the letter Zoe is writing, leading to a physical struggle which swiftly turns into a passionate kiss. Such scenarios utilize the public exposure and shame of a privately enacted, written sexual desire through a publicly represented medium in pursuit of erotic pleasure. The remaining two vignettes, 'The Answer' and 'A Midsummer Tryst,' also trade in such secret desires, depicting clandestine passions between women that are only articulated via the written word, are nervously approached in person, and enacted with very little verbalization. The written word, then, serves to foreground a sense of feminine privacy and silent, contained sexuality in much the same way as corsets and boots. But costuming and aesthetics, as well as their removal, are privileged as the more material indicators of containment and exposure in the visual medium of video pornography.

Memoirs of a Chambermaid also utilizes the written word, yet trades in it more consistently for erotic effect. Again, the film uses gender and class hierarchy within domestic spaces as a platform from which to deconstruct these very same boundaries. However, while *Victorian Love Letters* is more graphic, it does less to dismantle the concepts of class and domesticity in a traditional narrative sense. *Memoirs of a Chambermaid* is softer and less graphic, but narratively it goes further in breaking down the gender and class hierarchies that operate within the domestic Victorian home. Romance novelist Amy Rogers (Krista Lane) rents an old Victorian house for the summer in the hopes of finding inspiration for her next book. Experiencing writer's block, Amy looks around the house one evening and discovers a diary in the attic written in 1887 by a maid, Molly Mae (Shanna McCullough). The diary details her secret sexual relationship with Jason, the youngest son living in the house, whom she meets for trysts in their secret place, the attic. As Amy starts to plagiarize Molly's diary, recording her readings of the diary on her tape recorder, she has increasingly sexual experiences with apparitions of those characters involved, and falls in love with Jason. After considering that she may be going crazy, Amy also ponders that perhaps she *is* Molly. At the diary's and the film's conclusion, Jason disappears and Amy is miserably lonely and heart-sick. She picks up a pen, and begins to write, and suddenly we see Amy in Molly's clothes, back in the Victorian era with Jason. Meanwhile, the present-day narrative returns to its opening scene, where Molly is arriving at the same house, herself now the novelist, hoping to rent the place for the summer for inspiration. Both women are smiling knowingly, with evident pleasure and satisfaction.

The film functions from within a gendered sphere of romance, writing, and reading. Amy is a modern woman who writes erotica, and is privately reading

the erotica of another woman from a hundred years ago. Furthermore, the film is co-written by a woman, and has a feminine address in the traditional sense: lack of emphasis on money and meat shots, a visual focus on male bodies and female self-pleasure, and a consistent sexual attention to reading and writing that *Victorian Love Letters* lacks. Williams argues in *Hard Core* (1999) that the privileging of the money shot and meat shot are characteristic of a presumed heterosexual, male gaze, while the pornography produced for women typically avoids such phallocentric representations of sex. Candida Royalle's company *Femme*, for example, uses medium shots of full bodies, and puts less emphasis on always already erect penises that ejaculate to signal the end of the scene. For Williams, the significance of *Femme* is 'its serious attempt to visualize women's desire in a genre that has consistently continued to see sex... from the viewpoint of the phallus' (1999: 247). Yet, Williams is also careful to note that 'The problem does not lie in the show of the penis itself; the elimination of the money shot does not address the root problems of power and pleasure that only *appear* to reside in this display' (1999: 247). In this way, *Memoirs* is not subversive simply in its lack of emphasis on money and meat shots. In fact, it could be argued that the lack of explicitness renders the male and female bodies more contained, smooth, and tidy, while the bodies on display in the other films discussed are bawdy, out of control, and vulgar, embodying a more serious transgression of corporeal propriety and cultural boundaries.

Nevertheless, *Memoirs* does transgress these boundaries, but through narrative and language rather than physical displays of bodies and bodily functions. While *Victorian Love Letters* simply utilizes the love letter as a means of transitioning into visual pornography, *Memoirs* commits to its premise of the written and spoken word. By utilizing a supernatural, time-shifting format, contrasting technologies of sexuality and feminine subject positions are engaged and addressed in eroticized ways. Molly's diary is adapted from its private, written form into a cassette recording of the spoken voice of a modern, single career woman who produces her erotica for mass consumption on an electric typewriter, and tapes her ideas while lounging naked in the bath, drinking red wine. Most striking is Amy's use of the microphone, which is itself sexualized when Amy's recordings instigate a visual representation of the words, and Amy begins to lick and fellate the microphone before moving it downward, presumably to stimulate herself.

Furthermore, Amy subverts the traditional notion, present in both classical cinema and Gothic literature, that the actively inquisitive, desiring woman must either be a masochistic victim or be punished. Williams, discussing the female look in classical cinema, observes that those heroines who appear to have a 'powerful female look' are eventually punished, 'undermin[ing] the legitimacy and authentic subjectivity of this look' (1996: 17). 'The woman's gaze is punished,' Williams adds, 'by narrative processes that transform curiosity and desire into masochistic fantasy' (1996: 17). The manner in which Amy becomes consumed by Jason could be argued to replicate masochistic trends in Gothic literature and the romance novels that Amy herself writes. Yet, while Amy's return to the Victorian period, replacing

Molly, might appear to be a willing relinquishing of her modern independent subjectivity for the sake of a man, it is in reality more complex.

First, Amy only takes Molly's place after the class divisions of the family household have been transgressed, and Jason and Molly's secret relationship has been freed. Second, the film ends in a way that suggests a cyclical, indefinite trading of places between working class, Victorian Molly and middle class, independent, modern Amy. Just as the Victoria's Secret models enjoy an 'erotic mobility' that allows them to 'freely cross boundaries of public and private' (Juffer, 1998: 160), so Molly and Amy trade places in a way that transgresses the class privileges that are typically necessary to such mobility. The implication of a Twilight Zone-esque indefinite cycle suggests that Molly and Amy may enjoy the pleasures of multiple constructions of gender and class indefinitely. While Noelle visually and aurally transgresses the boundaries of proper femininity and public/private divides, Edwards transgresses these divides narratively while putting less emphasis on the physical transgressions of a contained feminine body. Both films, however, maintain and deconstruct boundaries in their pornographic use of gendered and classed domains of public and private Victorian sexuality.

The cultural work pornography does is integral to individual and collective working out of postmodern crises relating to sexuality, gender, and desire, often in problematic ways. The Victorian proves a useful source for such work, and pornography as a genre can point us toward more general postmodern anxiety over corporeality, spatial relations, and authenticity in an age of heightened technology and a perceived decline in individuality and intimacy. As Green-Lewis suggests, 'Desire for authenticity may be understood in part as a desire for that which we have first altered and then fetishized, a desire, perhaps, for a past in which we will find ourselves' (2000: 43). In this sense, the enduring pornographic use of the Victorian can illuminate not only cultural perceptions of the past, but cultural attitudes toward our own sexual identities, as well as the pornographic medium itself.

Notes

1. Shaun Costello, email interview 12 April 2012. Costello directed *The Passions of Carol* (1975), a modern retelling of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, and *Dracula Exotica* (1980).
2. *The Diary of My Secret Life* (Dir. P. Talbot Drummer, 1971), *Autobiography of a Flea* (Dir. Sharon McKnight, 1976), and three adaptations of the Edwardian novel, *A Man With a Maid: An English Tragedy* (c. 1920–1926), *The Naughty Victorians: An Erotic Tale of a Maiden's Revenge* (Dir. Robert Sickinger, 1982), and *A Man With a Maid: Tales of Victorian Lust* (Dir. Nica Noelle, 2009). I was able to identify *An English Tragedy* as an adaptation of *A Man With a Maid* thanks to the stills, plot, and character names provided in *Dirty Movies: An Illustrated History of the Stag Film 1915–1970* by Al Di Lauro and Gerald Rabkin (1976: 38), though they do not identify it as related to this novel.
3. It is important to note that since the 1980s, women have been actively involved in the production of pornography for women. See Anne G Sabo's (2012) *After Pornified: How*

Women are Transforming Pornography & Why It Really Matters for a detailed history and overview of women's contributions to pornographic film.

4. Sweetheart Video stated in their 'About Us' section: 'Sweetheart Video is committed to quality and realism. We never "cut" during the sex scenes, loop footage, or "position" the girls during their encounters. This allows our viewers to fully experience, if vicariously, the entire sexual encounter in real time as it occurred' (see Sweetheart Video, 2012).
5. Eric Edwards, email interview 27 February, 2013.
6. This is typical of most Sweetheart and Sweet Sinner productions, featuring titles such as *Lesbian Daydreams: Older Women, Younger Girls*, the *Mother Lovers Society* series, and *Legends and Starlets*. In a manner reflective of pornography's dependence on public/private divisions in order to transgress them, these titles foreground the difference in age between performers, celebrating the pleasures of maturity and experience at the same time as they re-emphasize age distinctions of 'younger' and 'older.'

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